

1920-1934: The death of the Austrian left

An account of the rapid decline of one of the world's most powerful workers' and left-wing movements in the face of fascism.

In the history of the working class some things are certain, and one of these things is the suicidally 'moderate' attitude of social democrats. No matter the gravity of the threat, European Centre-Left leaders have always had one gear - reverse. In 1920s and 30s Austria they developed this tendency into an art form under Social Democrat Party (SPO) chairman Otto Bauer and his executive.

The 1920s

Austrian workers in the mid 1920s were seemingly the most organised and class-conscious anywhere in Europe. The Socialist party was able to poll around 40% of the electorate throughout the 1920s and in 'Red Vienna' support reached nearly 60%. They had complete control of the Capital and were able to run it virtually as a 'Red Republic' of their own.

Astonishingly nearly 10% of the population were card carrying party members. They were able to raise their own paramilitary organisation - the Schutzbund - after an abortive revolution in 1919 left thousands of weapons in member's hands. Workers had already won control over the Vienna armoury in the aftermath of World War One.

A disastrous split which had occurred in German socialism after the Russian revolution simply didn't happen in Austria. The Moscow-controlled Comintern (Communist International) sponsored KPÖ had just 6000 members and was unable to command a single seat in the Austrian parliament. The Left was united and committed in the fight against Fascism. If their vigilance waned all they need do was glance over the border to Italy, whose own Left had been annihilated by Mussolini just a few years earlier.

Yet despite all this, less than a decade later the Fascists would be in charge, the workers smashed and 'Red' Vienna prepared to welcome Hitler with open arms, while the culprits hid in Czechoslovakia, making excuses.

Bauer's first betrayal of Social Democracy truly began on the night of March 2nd 1927.

Acting under orders from a governing parliamentary coalition of Bourgeois parties, elements of the Austrian armed forces - the Bundesheer - illegally broke into Vienna's armoury, seizing some relatively unimportant rifle parts.

The significance of this action became clear over the next two months. The break-in provoked a heated debate in parliament whether arms legally stockpiled to protect the Republic should be under the control of Social Democratic authorities. Eventually it was agreed that the weapons should be moved for safe keeping to a secret location known only to the government.

In May, machine guns, rifles, bullets and mortars were moved under cover of darkness to a warehouse in Vienna, never to be seen again by Social Democrat members. Over the following years, similar seizures occurred regularly and by the time insurrection had finally

broken out, the working class had lost their ammunition, 710 machine guns and nearly 40,000 modern rifles.

The Social Democratic party was not content with simply giving away the worker's arms. It also undermined their will to resist.

Earlier that year the Social Democratic party had held a rally through the small town of Schattendorf, as a counter to one already being held by the Fascist Heimwehr militia. During the rally a barman and his son began shouting fascist slogans at the marchers, who threw stones in return and tried to break into his pub. The publican fired a shotgun, killing two marchers - one a child, the other a pensioner.

He was acquitted 6 months later and by July 16th, two days after the trial, word of this injustice had spread around the city. In a spontaneous demonstration, workers downed tools and headed for the centre of Vienna to protest. A de-facto general strike was called around the city as trams stopped and streetlights went out. A huge mob gathered at first outside the parliament building, later moving down the main street to the city's high court. Mounted police responded to this by charging the crowd, but they were soon overwhelmed. Protesters charged inside the building and set it alight.

Faced by confrontation the Social Democratic leadership tried hard to avoid any further fighting. Their solution was to dispatch the Schutzbund - not to defend the workers but to restrain them. The armed force of the workers stood between them and the police. As Schutzbund leaders and the Social Democrat Mayor of Vienna urged calm upon the seething mass they were spat and sworn at.

Finally the protesters dissipated, attacking police stations as they returned to the suburbs. By the end of the troubles, 57 workers, 28 bystanders and 4 police were dead, the credibility of the Social Democrats was utterly destroyed and the hopes of the workers crushed. Months later at the Fifth National Schutzbund, conference delegates would discuss the lessons of July.

Their conclusion? They drafted a paper called 'Directives to be followed in case of spontaneous work stoppages for political reasons' - effectively a guide to using the workers' armed forces against a popular uprising.

The 1930s

The forces of Clerico-Fascism mounted against Austria's Social Democrats in the 1930s. After the elections of 1932, Christian Socialists formed a coalition government with the Fascist Heimwehr party. Emil Fey, leader of the Fascists, was made Minister of the Interior and his paramilitary was converted into an auxiliary police force.

In February 1933 the conflict between workers' and bosses' groups sparked into life. The strongest SPO trade union, the railway workers, went on strike. The government responded using the army, arresting strikers and sacking workers.

The Social Democrats pressed in parliament for an amnesty for the strikers (in itself a moderate demand given the state's already violent actions), and in March the Austrian parliament reached a deadlock in the debate. Rather than vote on the subject again however

the Prime Minister, Engelbert Dollfuss, chose to suspend parliament under an old War Emergency Powers Decree.

SPO members reacted with fury. Otto Leichter, who was to join the Communists after the civil war, said: 'This is the beginning of Fascism and if we don't resist the first move with all our power, then there will be no turning back'.

Six days later, Otto Bauer and the rest of the leadership rolled into action to calm their comrades revolutionary ardour. At a meeting of the 382 Vienna party sections they put forward a proposal that:

1. They should try and get the Fascists to reconvene parliament;
2. Karl Renner should publicly protest the dissolution of parliament;
3. Vienna's provincial assembly should be convened and Karl Seitz should argue against the emergency powers act before a constitutional court.

This line of negotiation with a government containing openly antidemocratic elements such as the Heimwehr ultimately proved fruitless and in mid-March, Social Democratic leaders belatedly issued orders for a general strike if police tried to prevent parliament meeting. As they well knew however, a general strike effectively meant civil war, so to prevent this from happening it was necessary for them to maintain the illusion that they'd resisted the suspension of parliament.

The SPO thus took on the strange task of trying to keep the bosses' government and the Schutzbund - their own paramilitary - from each other's throats. The result was a farce. Bauer and the rest of the Socialist leadership went to parliament early on the 16th and declared the house to have 'met'. The police then escorted them from the building, and the government declared their meeting void. As Bauer could claim to have restored parliament, he was able to tell the Schutzbund to stand down.

Any doubts over the nature of the new regime must have been dispelled over the coming months. Dollfuss announced that parliament 'had died and would not return' and government would be 'on the basis of estates under a strong, authoritarian leadership', yet the SPO executive continued to prevaricate. By February 1934 this became too much for the party secretary of Linz, Bernasek. He dispatched a letter to the Executive:

'When tomorrow, Monday, an arms search begins in an Upper Austrian city or when officials of the party, particularly Schutzbündler, are arrested, violent resistance will occur and will persist, turning into an attack. We expect that upon receipt of our telephone communication to Vienna, you will give the Viennese working class, and thus the whole working class, the signal to let go. We will not turn back. I have not informed the party executive of this decision. If the working class leaves us in the lurch, shame and disgrace on them.'

Otto Bauer received the letter at midnight, and quickly dispatched a message demanding Bernasek refrain from action. Nevertheless, when at six in the morning police attacked the Social Democrat headquarters in Linz, Schutzbündler troops opened fire with machine guns and Austria was pitched into civil war.

With insurrection finally underway, the leadership dithered once again. They rushed about the city in search of a compromise, before the Social Democrat Mayor's eventual arrest on

the afternoon of the twelfth. At the time of his arrest, the Mayor had been busy trying to halt the general strike by restarting the trams (their stoppage was the acknowledged sign for revolt).

That morning the Social Democratic party held one last meeting before their dissolution, issuing Otto Bauer's closing orders that the Schutzbund not fire unless fired upon. The fighting itself was over in days, the failure to effect a railway strike and the inaction of the Lower Austrian Schutzbund preventing any attempt to halt government reinforcements. The rebels were hopelessly outnumbered. In the end 314 workers lay dead, and before the month was out the 'leadership' fled to Czechoslovakia to bleat it wasn't their fault and attempt to rebuild their party.

Over the course of seven years, the Social Democratic leadership had managed to divide a united working class into a series of embittered, squabbling factions, each accusing the party of capitulation to the fascist bourgeois government.

The lesson of the Austrian civil war is that a led working class is one ripe for exploitation and betrayal, whereas a free working class will resist oppression wherever it encounters it

By Jack Ray